



County of San Diego
Department of Environmental Health



What To Do After a Wildfire

Do not start any clean up in the unincorporated area of the County until you have been cleared by a County damage assessment team. You could jeopardize your FEMA or insurance claims. For more information please call 211.

Residents returning to fire damaged homes need to take many precautions. Hazardous materials as well as structural damage pose serious threats to your health and safety. It is strongly advised you take some basic safety measures when cleaning up your property.

Returning to the Fire Zone

- **Use caution and exercise good judgment when re-entering a burned area.** Hazards may still exist, including hot spots, which can flare up without warning.
- **Avoid damaged or fallen power poles or lines, and downed wires.**
- **Immediately report electrical damage to authorities.** Electric wires may shock people or cause further fires. If possible, remain on the scene to warn others of the hazard until repair crews arrive.
- **Be careful around burned trees and power poles.** They may have lost stability and fall due to fire damage.
- **Watch for ash pits and mark them for safety.** Ash pits are holes full of hot ashes, created by burned trees and stumps. Falling into ash pits or landing in them with your hands or feet can cause serious burns. Warn your family and neighbors to keep clear of these pits.
- **Visually check the stability of the trees.** Any tree that has been weakened by fire may be a hazard. Winds are normally responsible for toppling weakened trees. The wind patterns in your area may have changed as a result of the loss of adjacent tree cover.
 - **Look for burns on the tree trunk.** If the bark on the trunk has been burned off or scorched by very high temperatures completely around the circumference, the tree will not survive. Where fire has burnt deep into the trunk, the tree should be considered unstable.
 - **Look for burnt roots by probing the ground with a rod around the base of the tree and several feet away from the base.** Roots are generally six to eight

inches below the surface. If the roots have been burned, you should consider this tree very unstable, and it may be toppled by wind.

- **A scorched tree is one that has lost part or all of its leaves or needles.** Healthy deciduous trees are resilient and may produce new branches and leaves as well as sprouts at the base of the tree. Evergreen trees may survive when partially scorched. An evergreen tree that has been damaged by fire is subject to bark beetle attack. Please seek professional assistance from the forestry service concerning measures for protecting evergreens from bark beetle attack.

Returning to Your Home

- **If your home was damaged, check with your local utilities company.** Make sure gas and electricity are turned off before entering the area. SDG&E Phone: (800) 411-SDGE.
- **Use a flashlight.** Do not light matches or turn on electrical switches if you suspect electrical damage or gas leaks.
- **Check for gas leaks starting at the water heater.** If you smell gas, get everyone out of the house; turn off the main gas valve, open windows and contact the utility company.
- **If there is no power, check to make sure the main breaker is on.** Fires may cause breakers to trip. If the breakers are on and power is still not present, contact the utility company.
- **Inspect the roof immediately and extinguish any sparks or embers.** Wildfires may have left burning embers that could re-ignite.
- **Recheck for smoke and sparks throughout the home, including the attic for several hours.** The winds of wildfires can blow burning embers anywhere. Keep checking your home for embers that could cause fires.
- **Before sifting through debris, using a face mask, spray with a fine spray mist of water to minimize health impacts from breathing dust particles.**
- **Other hazards to be aware of:**
 - Unstable walls and roofs
 - Sharp objects such as nails, glass, metal, etc
 - Dead and injured animals
 - Snakes

Personal Protection

Take precautions while cleaning your property. You may be exposed to potential health risks from hazardous materials.

- Wear protective glasses or goggles to protect your eyes.
- Use a two-strap dust particulate mask with a nose clip. If you do not have a mask, use a damp cloth to cover your nose and mouth.
- Wear long sleeved shirt and long pants to protect your skin.
- Wear leather gloves to protect hands from sharp objects while removing debris.
- Wear rubber gloves when working with outhouse remnants, plumbing fixtures, sewer piping, and chemicals.

- Wear boots with thick (lug) soles. Avoid tennis/running shoes, whose soles can melt or be punctured.

Hazardous Materials

Hazardous materials such as household cleaning products, paint, batteries, gasoline, contaminated fuel, and damaged fuel containers need to be properly handled to avoid risk.

- For information on how to properly dispose of household hazardous waste please call:
 - Unincorporated areas 877-R-1-EARTH of the County (877-713-2784)
 - City of San Diego 858-694-7000
 - North County Cities 800-714-1195
- For information on how to clean up spilled hazardous materials please contact the County of San Diego Hazardous Materials Information Line at 619-338-2231.

Propane and Heating Oil Tanks

- **If you have a propane tank system, contact a propane supplier, turn off valves on the system, and leave valves closed until the supplier inspects your system.** Tanks, brass and copper fittings and lines may have been damaged from the heat and be unsafe. If fire burned the tank, the pressure relief valve probably opened and released the contents.
- **If you have a heating oil tank system, contact a heating oil supplier for an inspection of your system before using.** The tank may have shifted or fallen from the stand and fuel lines may have kinked or weakened. Heat from the fire may have caused the tank to warp or bulge. Non-vented tanks are more likely to bulge or show signs of stress. The fire may have loosened or damaged fittings and filters. Portions of this document were excerpted from the American Red Cross's pamphlet: What to do After a Wildfire